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ABSTRACT

Data from three projects were analyzed with two questions in mind: Do boys and girls attend and respond to different aspects of family life? and, do children in general experience the family as sex-differentiated? Results were expected to add to understanding of the sources of gender differences in adults' orientations to marriage and parenting. Retrospective data regarding adults' recall of their parents' behavior were available from the Family Relationships and the Pregnancy and Parenthood projects. In addition, from the Family Changes Project a great deal of data were available from a younger generation of 6- to 12-year-olds. The latter information concerned participating children's perceptions, feelings, and beliefs about both parents (who had recently separated). While variables and data from each project were different, similar questions could be asked across the studies. Results indicated inconsistent child gender differences. However, there were differences in children's views of mothers versus fathers. In general, mothers were described as being warmer but also more authoritarian and controlling. Finally, there were also some differences in the ways children of different genders viewed their mothers and fathers, and some indications that the current generation of children is not as differentiated by their parents along gender lines as previous generations. (CB)

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Gender Differences in Children's Experiences of the Family

Abigail J. Stewart and Anne P. Copeland

Very little is known about how children experience and understand their families; even less is known about how children's views vary by gender. Data from the three projects were analyzed with two questions in mind: do boys and girls attend to and respond to different aspects of family life; and do children in general experience the family as sex-differentiated? Analyses aimed at these two questions were expected to add to our understanding of the sources of gender differences in adults' orientations to marriage and parenting. For example, if boys and girls differ in what they notice and respond to about their families of origin, we might expect that adult gender differences are rooted in long-standing patterns of experience and behavior, or possibly even in innate differences in response dispositions. If, however, boys and girls respond similarly, but are exposed to highly sex-differentiated families, adult gender differences may be viewed as more likely the result of repeated and lengthy exposure to sex-differentiated models than gender-based response differences.

Retrospective data regarding adult children's recall of their parents' behavior were available from The Family Relationships and The Pregnancy and Parenthood Projects. In addition, from the Family Changes Project, a great deal of data were available from a younger generation of 6-12-year-old children about their perceptions, feelings, and beliefs about both parents. It must be noted, though, that these children were discussing parents recently separated.

The measures from the three projects were all different, and often based on different types of data (see Table 1). From the Family Relationships Project we had two measures which yielded three variables: the Family Relationships Scale, based on content analysis of an entire interview, and

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yielding an index of the maturity of orientation to the relationship and to the other person, which was expressed in the subject's description of his or her current relationship with each parent; the Block Child-Rearing Practices Report, filled out in terms of the adult child's recall of the parent's child-rearing behavior in the past, and yielding two independent, factor-analytically-derived scales for warm-accepting (10 items) and authoritarian-controlling(7 items) behavior.

From the Pregnancy and Parenthood Project we also had two measures: the degree to which adult children viewed themselves as currently like each parent in each of four areas(e.g., marriage, parenting, etc.); and the degree to which adult children remembered each parent as having been warm and nurturant towards them in the past (five items for each parent). Finally, from the Family Changes Project, we had children's interview responses to three questions about each parent:"what are some of the things you like about [your mom/your dad]?"; "what are some of the things you don't like about [your mom/your dad]?"; "why do you think [he/she] does that?" The responses to these questions were coded into 20 presence/absence categories. These categories included several describing warm and nurturant, as well as disciplinary and hostile aspects of both parents. Thus, though the measures used were quite different in the different projects, there was some similarity in the constructs assessed across them.

The data were, of course, analyzed separately, in each Project; however, similar questions could be asked across the studies: namely, do male and female children differ in how they view their parents' behavior and traits; do children in general differ in how they view their mothers vs. fathers; and is there an interaction between these two factors such that one gender of child is particularly sensitive to a particular parent? In other words, we use a two-by-two -- or gender of child by gender of parent --

factorial design. Data will be reported for each of these questions, across the three studies.

Our notion was that if the pattern of the findings was consistent across the three studies and across descriptions of both past and current parent-child relationships, very robust and stable differences in children's experience of the famly must be involved. If samples differing not only in terms of the measures used, but also the intactness of their family, their age at the time of data collection, and the time in history when they were raised, nevertheless showed gender of child or gender of parent differences which were consistent, some very powerful force for consistency must be present. If, however, the two adult samples which were both reared during the post-World War II feminine mystique years, revealed differences, especially in their recall of their parents in the past, and these differences were not found in the sample of present day children, three interpretations would be possible: the adult samples and the current children differ in their length of exposure to an intact, two-parent family structure, their level of cognitive and personality development is different, and the socio-historic period in which they were raised was quite different. Any of these variables might account for there being more differences in the adult than the child sample.

Our first question was, then, are there child gender differences? The young adult men and women in the Family Relationships Project did not differ in the degree to which they expressed a mature orientation to their current relationships with their parents. However, in describing their parents' past behavior and attitudes on the Block Child-rearing Practices Report, men (or, for these purposes, male children) described both parents as both more warm and accepting and more authoritarian and controlling than did women (or female children). On the other hand, adult female children in the Pregnancy and Parenthood Project tended to describe their parents as

having been more nurturant than did adult male children, but did not differ in the degree to which they reported being like their parents now. The data from the Family Changes Project revealed very few child gender effects.There was only one significant difference out of 20 possible comparisons; only when boys were describing what things they did not like about their parents did they differ from girls, and here only in their more frequent statement that there is nothing they disliked. In general, then, we see some tendency for male children to be unable to articulate or describe negative aspects of their parents, but the more striking result is how similar males and females were in their descriptions of their parents.

What about views of mothers vs. fathers as reported by their children, though? Here, more differences emerge. In the Family Relationships Project, young adults,regardless of their gender, described mothers as having been warmer, but also as more authoritarian and controlling, on the Block Child Rearing Practices Report. Both adult males and females from this project also described their current relationships with their mothers in more mature terms than their current relationship with their father. The women in the Pregnancy and Parenthood Project also remembered their mothers as having been more nurturant than their fathers.

From the children in the Family Changes Project, we get confirmation of this pattern of differentiating mothers and fathers. In 9 out of 20 comparisons, mothers and fathers were differently described,and in two more there were trends for a difference. Children more often reported for mothers than fathers that they interacted with them ("she plays with me and stuff") and expressed affection toward them ("she's really nice to me"). They also reported liking physical attributes of their mothers more often than fathers. When asked what they did not like about each parent, mothers were more often criticized for disciplining than were fathers, but fathers were more often criticized for having an inadequate relationship with the mother in some way.

These responses seemed to reveal a broader difference in the children's relations with both parents. Thus, after answering the question about what they did not like about a parent, children were asked "Why do you think she, or he, does that?" Children said mothers, who, as noted earlier, were criticized for disciplining them too much, did that because the children deserved it. Fathers, described more as having an inadequate relationship with the mothers, were thought by the child to do that because of some internal negative trait on the fathers' part (such as "He's just that type of person" or "he's just got a mean temper"). In addition, children said "I don't know" more to this follow-up question about fathers than mothers -- perhaps because they have less exposure to their fathers, or because their fathers are less inclined to explain their actions to them than are their mothers. Finally, children were more likely to say of their fathers "I can't think of anything I don't like" or "There's nothing I don't like about him." Whether this inability to articulate negative characteristics of their fathers, at least in response to an open-ended question, results from these children's recent separations from their fathers, or from lack of detailed knowledge of and closeness to their fathers, is unclear

Our last question was, do children of different genders differ in their views of their mothers and fathers? In most cases, no such differences emerged. Thus, in the Family Changes Project, out of 20 variables, the only significant interaction of child gender by parent gender suggested that girls were more likely than boys to mention their mother's physical attributes as something they liked about them; they also mentioned these more than physical attributes of their fathers. Similarly, there was only a trend for the interaction of parent and child gender for adult children on the Family Relationships Project. That trend suggested that adult females described more mature relationships with their mothers than with their fathers or than males

described with either parent. Finally, where it might seem most likely, in the rating of which parent one is currently most like, there was no interaction for adult children from the Pregnancy and Parenthood Project. However, from the two samples of adult children, one set of consistent interactions did emerge. In the Family Relationships Project, there was an interaction for young adults' ratings of their parents' warmth -- sons remembered their mothers as being warmer and more accepting than did daughters. Reciprocally, daughters tended to see their fathers as less authoritarian and controlling than did sons, and less authoritarian and controlling than they saw their mothers. On the other hand, sons, while not distinguishing their parents on this factor, saw both parents as more authoritarian and controlling than daughters saw either parent. Similarly, in the Pregnancy and Parenthood Project, sons, in particular, saw their fathers as less nurturing than their mothers and as less nurturing than daughters saw them. In the adult samples, then,but not the current child sample, a differential view of the past nurturance of the two parents was present in male and female subjects from these two separate projects.

What can we conclude from this pattern of results? First, and <u>most</u> clearly, we have found clear gender of parent differences in all three studies. These differences, despite varied measures, are also quite consistent, indicating that our adult children recall, and our contemporary children experience, their mothers and fathers as different in the same way. In all three studies, mothers are described or rated as warmer and more nurturant than fathers. This does not seem to result from children simply "liking" their mothers better though, since mothers and fathers were not described as differing in desirable personalities, skills, or the tendency to do nice things for children. Moreover, mothers were <u>also</u> rated, in both studies with relevant measures, as the more disciplinary or controlling

parent. Overall, mothers seem literally to be experienced, in all three studies, as the more "parental" parent -- providing both affection and limits. In contrast, fathers seem -- even in the most contemporary families -- both not to be perceived in these parental terms, and not to be seen as fully intelligible to the child.

In contrast to this clear sex-differentiated pattern in terms of children's views of their parents, there were no consistent gender of child effects at all. Thus, there is no basis for believing that the differences perceived as present in the parents (and, indeed, according to the evidence of the last paper, actually present in the parents) result from early gender differences in children. In fact, the pattern of gender of child by gender of parent interactions provides some suggestion that our contemporary children may -- at least in some small way -- be experiencing somewhat less gender-differentiation in the family than past children have. In both adult samples, adult males recalled their fathers as having been less nurturant than did females, and as less nurturant than their mothers. Moreover, in the Family Relationships Project, the adult males recalled both parents, but especially fathers, as more controlling than did girls. These kinds of interactions were not present in the contemporary Family Changes Project data at all.

It may be, then, that in the past boys and girls were not only exposed to gender-differentiated parents, but were also themselves differentiated along gender lines by those parents. As adults, then, these boys and girls carry similar images of mothers' and fathers' behavior, but those images have different intensity or affective meaning. Thus, though both males and females viewed their mothers as more nurturant than their fathers, this differentiating was more extreme for males than females. The contemporary children do seem to see their mothers and fathers very much as

the older generation saw their parents -- but the male and female children do not differ in their perspective on their parents, at least at this age.

It is impossible to know for sure whether this common, gender-irrelevant perspective on gender-differentiated parents can be maintained. Even more, we cannot know whether this shared understanding could form a basis -- along with years of gender-irrelevant socialization -- for future men and women to produce families with less gender-based parent roles. An alternative possibility is, of course, that today's children, after years of exposure to gender-differentiation inside and outside the family, will become adults whose basic experience of the family is gender-linked in a way that their experience as children is not.

Table 1

Measures Used to Assess Children's Experience of their Parents

Family Relationships Project(longitudinal study of adult children's changing relationships with their parents, spouses and children)

Family Relationships Scale: interview measure of current maturity of orientation to the relationship and the other

Block Child-Rearing Practices Report: paper and pencil report by adult child, on seven-point scales, of parent's behavior and attitudes in the past; two scales: Warmth-affection; Authoritarian-controlling

Pregnancy and Parenthood Project (longitudinal study of families experiencing addition of a family member from pregnancy to that child's fifth birthday)

Similarity to Parents Scale: paper and pencil report on five-point scales, of degree to which adult child is currently like each parent in four areas (personality, parenting, marital relationship, and hopes and wishes)

Remembered Nurturance and Involvement Scale: paper and pencil report on five-point scales, of how nurturant and involved each parent was, in relation to them, when they were "a young child"(five items each)

Family Changes Project(longitudinal study of families experiencing parental separation

Liked aspects of parent(six codes) Presence or absence of child mention of liking parent because he/she: (1) treats me well;(2)interacts with(plays with) me; (3) expresses affection; has particular (4) skills and abilities; (5)physical attributes; or (6) personality traits

Disliked aspects of parent(five codes) Presence or absence of child mention of disliking parent because he/she (1) disciplines; (2)displays objectionable behaviors(e.g., drinking,smoking) (3)has objectionable personality characteristics;(4)is globally inadequate as a parent; (5)treats the child's other parent badly.

Incapacity to describe parent (four codes) Presence/absence of child mention of liking or disliking everything or nothing about the parent

Attribution of source of disliked aspect(five codes Presence/absence of child's judgment of reason for disliked parent characteristic as:(1)child doesn't know reason; (2) negative parent state(e.g., bad mood, tired); (3) negative parent trait (e.g.,parent is mean;(4)parent is correct(e.g., discipline is deserved);(5)parent is well-meaning though incorrect (he thinks that will help, but it doesn't)

Table 2
Gender Differences in Children's Experience of the Family

Project	Significant differences	Trends	No differences
	CHILD GENDER DIFFERENCES		
FRP	Warmth on Block(males high) Controlling on Block (males high)		Current relationship maturity
P&P		Remembered nurturance (female high)	Current similarity
FCP	Nothing disliked(males high)	Express affection liked (female high) Physical attributes liked (female high)	All other codes
	PARENT GENDER DIFFERENCES		
FRP	Current relationship maturity (mothers higher) Warmth on Block (mothers high) Controlling on Block mothers high)		
P&P	Remembered nurturance (mothers high)		Current similarity
FCP	Liked aspects		
	Interacts (mothers high) Expresses affection (mothers high) Physical attributes (mothers high)		Treats me well Skills Personality
	Disliked aspects		
	Discipline (mothers high) Negative relations with (fathers high)	Personality (mother high)	Behaviors Parental inadequacy
	Inability to describe		
	Dislike nothing (father high)		Like nothing Like everything Dislike everything
	Attributed source of disliked aspect		
	Don't know (father high) Negative trait (father high) I deserved it (mother high)	Negative state (mother high)	Well-meaning